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Satchmo's Stamp of Approval

By ROXANE ORGILL

New Orleans

At the recent unveiling of the Louis Armstrong 32-cent commemorative stamp, 90-year-old Adolphus "Doc" Cheatham sat with the mayor and other dignitaries, fingering the valves of his silver trumpet all through the speeches. When the New Orleans Postal Jazz Ensemble struck up "What a Wonderful World," he could wait no longer. Cutting into the clarinet solo, he pointed the bell of his horn toward heaven and sent a message to Satchmo.

The message was probably "Thank you." When Mr. Cheatham got to Chicago in the '20s, a kid from Nashville with a dollar and change in his pocket, he found the doors closed. New Orleans musicians had all the jobs. He spoke to Armstrong, and the doors opened.

Such stories about Armstrong are legion. He touched many, many people, not only as a musician—the trumpet player who originated the jazz solo, the singer who could transform a silly pop song into art music—but as a man.

Then why did it take 14 years to get his image onto a piece of prephosphored paper measuring 1.56 by 1.23 inches, coated on one side with water-activated gum? How come Elvis got there first, not to mention Howlin' Wolf?

It was certainly not for lack of public interest.

In 1981, the first year that Armstrong was eligible as a stamp subject (you must be dead at least 10 years), his widow, Lucille Armstrong, wrote a letter to the senior representative for governmental relations at the U.S. Postal Service: "It has been brought to my attention that the U.S. Postal Service Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee is considering recommending an issuance of a commemorative stamp in the name of my husband, Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong. I am very pleased." In two single-spaced pages, she made her case, noting his status as an unofficial ambassador of goodwill, who brought temporary peace to the Congo simply by showing up to play his horn.

The Postal Service noted her suggestion, as it does 40,000 suggestions received each year. Anyone can suggest a stamp subject to the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee, a 15-member body appointed by the postmaster general, provided the subject is "interesting and educational" and meets 12 other criteria. The committee reviews every suggestion before making recommendations to the postmaster, who makes the final decision.

To bolster the argument, the late Mrs. Armstrong and her friend Phoebe Jacobs, now vice president of the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation, mounted a signature campaign. With help from ASCAP, the Actor's Fund, several elected officials, musicians Quincy Jones, Marian McPartland and Benny Carter, producer George Avakian, and the student bodies of the two Louis Armstrong schools in Queens, N.Y., to name just a handful of the parties, they amassed half a million signatures in six years, Mrs. Jacobs estimates.

The Postal Service has no record of them.

"The file only goes back to 1987," said Postal Service spokesperson Monica Hand. "That's not to say they never existed," she added.

But the Postal Service does have a stack of correspondence from Donald Marquis, curator of the jazz collection at the Louisiana State Museum here in Armstrong's hometown. After the Duke Elling-



ton stamp came out in 1986, Mr. Marquis and the New Orleans Jazz Club president, Bill Farrell Jr., decided it was Louis's turn. Mr. Marquis put a stack of petitions atop a display case, and every three or four months, he mailed a batch of signatures to Washington. When the Postal Service decided in late 1994 to honor Armstrong with a stamp, following the lead of Burkina Faso, Chad, Dominica, Gabon, Guyana, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, St. Vincent and Tanzania, Mr. Marquis did a tally. He had collected 38,765 names from all 50 states and 62 countries.

Sadly, the petitions may have had little effect. "I don't think the number of signatures is what brought the issue to the forefront," says Virginia Noelke, president of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee. "He has been on our agenda consistently since he was eligible." (Don't tell that to the Swedish visitor who took the petition home and got 85 friends to sign it.)

What may have turned the tide in Washington was a bit of market research conducted by the Postal Service in 1994, which revealed Armstrong to be the most requested male subject. A new format helped also, Ms. Noelke said. The Legends of American Music series began in 1993 with Elvis Presley, and continued with other rock 'n' roll figures, Hank Williams and country musicians, "Oklahoma!" and Broadway shows, Ethel Merman, Bessie Smith, Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday and other pop, blues and jazz singers.

At the ceremony, held in Armstrong Park and hosted by the ever-eloquent Wynton Marsalis, fans wondered aloud whether Armstrong's turn would have come sooner had he not spoken out against the U.S. government during the Little Rock, Ark., school troubles of 1957. When Governor Orval Faubus refused to integrate the schools and President Eisenhower did nothing to interfere, Armstrong raised his voice, politically, for the first time. "The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell," he told the press. "The President has no guts."

(Later, when Eisenhower ordered troops to Little Rock to enforce the law, Armstrong sent him a congratulatory telegram: "If you decide to walk into the schools with the colored kids, take me along, Daddy. God bless you.")

"Why else would they do Elvis Presley before Louis?" asked one admirer. The official answer, from Ms. Noelke, was that Presley's enormous fan club put such pressure on the Postal Service, via TV and newspaper stories, that the committee felt compelled to put the King on a stamp. As it turned out, the Elvis stamp is the single most popular U.S. commemorative, with a record 500 million print run, of which an astounding 124 million stamps were never used, but saved. The Armstrong stamp, by contrast, has a 150 million print run.

None of this seemed to matter one whit to Mr. Cheatham, who came to blow his horn in tribute to a pal, and ended up blowing listeners away with his sound, strong and delicate, like a spider's web, and the elegance of his phrasing. He closed out a busy week with a concert in the Blue Room of the Fairmont Hotel (formerly the Roosevelt, once famous for its radio broadcasts), where he played marvelous duets with New Orleans's current favorite resident trumpeter, Nicholas Payton, who is about 70 years his junior. Mr. Payton's sound is bright and aggressive, in contrast to Mr. Cheatham's sweet horn. The elder musician sat back, grinning, as Mr. Payton took his first solo, blowing hard and high, and sounding just a little like Satchmo himself.

Ms. Orgill is a writer in Hoboken, N.J., who is collecting the letters of Louis Armstrong.